

Death Valley Ranch Swimming Pool  
Death Valley National Monument  
Inyo County  
California

HABS No. CA-2257 I

HABS  
CAL,  
H-DVNM,  
1-1

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

DEATH VALLEY RANCH SWIMMING POOL  
(Scotty's Castle, Swimming Pool)

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Location: National Park Service Route 5 (commonly known as the North Highway), 25 miles west of the junction of US Route 95 with Nevada State Route 267 (commonly known as Scotty's Junction), Death Valley National Monument, Inyo County, California.

Present Owner: National Park Service.

Present Use: Not in use.

Significance: Although a feature of this type was conceived in some form as early as 1925, other projects took priority. More so than any other project, the swimming pool's incomplete state clearly illustrates how external pressures forced Johnson to cease construction well before he had planned.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Note: For general information on the Death Valley Ranch complex, see HABS No. CA-2557.

A. Physical History:

1. Date of Erection:

November 1925 - M. Roy Thompson prepared a sketch for the remodeling of the Main House that includes a large body of water in front that he labeled the "lake."  
December 1925 - Thompson discussed the proposed swimming pool in a letter to Johnson.<sup>1</sup>  
October 1927 - Thompson estimates construction material needs for the "concrete work around the lake."<sup>2</sup>  
January 1928 - Thompson suggested narrowing the bridge over the "lake."<sup>3</sup>  
February 1928 - Grading for the lake began.<sup>4</sup>  
June 1930 - H.B. Brown constructed the forms for the six arches in the center of the bridge, making them too high. He also set the "submarine lighting 8 inches too high."<sup>5</sup>  
September 1930 - Carpenters finished the forms, placed the steel in the bridge and began pouring the concrete for the bridge.<sup>6</sup>  
October 1930 - Construction held up until enough gravel could be produced by the new plant.<sup>7</sup>  
November 1930 - Footings poured for north wall. Pouring of concrete for north wall was held up until plans of details for windows were received. Johnson was at the Ranch and wrote an angry letter to MacNeilledge.<sup>8</sup>

DEATH VALLEY RANCH SWIMMING POOL  
HABS No. GA-2257 I (Page 2)

May 1931 - All construction stopped, leaving the pool in much the state it is today.

2. Architect: Charles A. MacNeilledge (1926-1930)  
Martin de Dubovay (1930-1931)
3. Original and Subsequent Owners:  
  
Albert Mussey Johnson (1928-1948)  
Gospel Foundation (1948-1970)  
National Park Service (1970-Present)
4. Builder, etc:  
  
General Superintendent - M. Roy Thompson  
Building Superintendent - H. B. Brown (1926-1930)  
C. G. Johnson (1930-1931)
5. Original plans and construction: Plans for a large body of water in front of the Main House date from as early as November 1925 when Thompson prepared a sketch for remodeling of the Main House that included a "lake" directly in front. Perhaps the undulating curves of the pool were influenced by this earlier sketch.  
  
Designs prepared by MacNeilledge were incredibly fanciful and grandiose. His scheme included three different rock-lined watercourses that would empty into the pool, a large diving platform, round-arched arcades at various locations about the pool, alternating benches and flower pots to punctuate the tiled walk that would surround the perimeter, a water spout in the center of each end, underwater flood lights and a footbridge with a fountain. Only the flood lights and footbridge got beyond the design stage.  
  
Johnson once said that completing the swimming pool would do more than anything else to make the Ranch feel complete. Some rumors suggest that Johnson sought estimates for the work as late as the mid-1940s.<sup>9</sup>
6. Alterations and additions: Construction of the pool was discontinued in 1931, as was all construction for the unfinished projects at the Ranch. A great deal of steel reinforcement bar was left protruding from the concrete walls. Johnson died in 1948 and hopes of ever completing the pool died with him. Mary Liddecoat, the President of the Gospel Foundation, spent several hours of her spare time sawing down these protruding re-bars, believing them to be a hazard to the visiting public.<sup>10</sup> It might have been at this time that metal stanchions and a chain link guard rail was added.

B. Historical Context:

The construction correspondence in the Reference Library of Scotty's Castle can be very confusing in relation to the construction of the pool. An early drawing by Thompson labels the large body of water in front of the Main House a "lake." Thompson continues to use this term even though Johnson and MacNeilledge generally refer to it as a "swimming pool." At one point Johnson learns of certain health code regulations that would be relevant in the construction of a "pool" but not a "lake." He then instructs all concerned to use the term "lake" instead, although nothing about the design itself need change.

Perhaps because MacNeilledge's plans were so elaborate, he often found it difficult to meet certain established deadlines for construction. This caused Johnson to send first a telegram and then a letter stating how angry and upset he was.<sup>11</sup> This was not the first time MacNeilledge was delinquent in delivering plans on an agreed-upon schedule, but it is the first instance of any documentation of Johnson becoming so infuriated. Following this incident Johnson called MacNeilledge to the Ranch by telegram for a private discussion and soon after MacNeilledge was fired. The working drawings for the pool after that were signed by Martin de Dubovay. MacNeilledge's name block no longer appears on any of the later drawings.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural Character: In outline the pool forms a series of naturalistic undulating curves. In its far-from-complete state the large and complexly-formed footbridge dominates what it was meant to adorn.
2. Condition of Fabric: Good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The pool is 270' long including the 10'-wide footbridge. The depth varies from 3' at the most shallow to approximately 15' at its deepest. The pool is approximately 20' across at its widest point.
2. Foundations: Concrete footings.
3. Wall construction, finish, color: Gray concrete walls left unfinished. Vertical flood lights rim the north wall.
4. Structural system, framing: The entirety is built of steel reinforced poured-in-place concrete.

DEATH VALLEY RANCH SWIMMING POOL  
HABS No. CA-2257 I (Page 4)

5. Windows: The northwest corner of the pool has three large square windows with metal frames to allow the viewer to see underwater from the tunnel that ran along the north side of the pool.
6. Decorative Features: A large concrete footbridge spans the center of the pool, separating the shallower end to the east from the deeper end to the west. The bridge conceals a tunnel that runs directly underneath. In plan it resembles a Baroque-like emblem similar to those found in many Spanish Missions.

Six large round-arched openings, three on each side, support a large central landing. They are open and would have allowed water and swimmers to pass freely from one end to the other. A series of portholes pierce the sidewalls of the bridge to light the tunnel underneath. The central landing contains a large circular planting bed that, according to the original plans, was intended to be a fountain. Smaller landings to either side have planting beds that are corbelled out from the sidewalls.

- D. Site: The pool is situated directly south of and parallel to the Main House.

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The Scotty's Castle Recording Project at Death Valley National Monument, California, was undertaken during the summers 1987-89 by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) division of the National Park Service, and co-sponsored by the Western Regional Office of the National Park Service. Principals involved were Robert J. Kapsch, Chief of HABS/HAER; Kenneth L. Anderson, AIA, Chief of HABS and project leader in 1987 and 1988; and Paul D. Dolinsky, Principal Architect of HABS and project leader in 1989.

The recording teams were supervised in the field by Marlys B. Thurber in 1987, John White in 1988, and Joseph D. Balachowski in 1989. The written documentation was prepared by Richard A. Bernstein of Cornell University in 1987.

PART IV. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

The repository of nearly all of the sources of information is the Reference Library and Preservation Office, Scotty's Castle, Death Valley National Monument, California. Individual references take the form of endnotes, as follows:

1. Letter from M. Roy Thompson to Albert M. Johnson dated December 25, 1925. Manuscript 7, box 1.

DEATH VALLEY RANCH SWIMMING POOL  
HABS No. CA-2257 I (Page 5)

2. Letter from M. Roy Thompson to Charles Alexander MacNeilledge dated October 10, 1927. Manuscript 7, box
3. Letter from M. Roy Thompson to Albert M. Johnson dated January 29, 1928. Manuscript 7, box 6.
4. Letter from M. Roy Thompson to Albert M. Johnson dated February 28, 1928. Manuscript 7, box 6.
5. Letter from M. Roy Thompson to Charles Alexander MacNeilledge dated June 6, 1930. Manuscript 7, box 11.
6. Letters from M. Roy Thompson to Albert M. Johnson dated September 17 and September 24, 1930. Manuscript 7, box 12.
7. Letters from M. Roy Thompson to Albert M. Johnson dated October 8 and October 16, 1930. Manuscript 7, box 12.
8. Letters from M. Roy Thompson to Albert M. Johnson dated October 5 and October 9, 1930. Letter from Albert M. Johnson to Charles Alexander MacNeilledge dated October 12, 1930. Manuscript 12, box 12.
9. Conversation with Don Creech, August, 1987.
10. Conversation with Esy Fields, August, 1987.
11. Telegram and letter from Albert M. Johnson to Charles Alexander MacNeilledge dated November 5 and 9, 1930. Manuscript 7, box 12.